

Sermon: Year C, Pentecost 8 Proper 10

Text: Luke 10:25-37

Preached: July 14, 2013 at CTL

Give us new eyes, Lord. AMEN

When I was a kid, every summer we would pack up the station wagon, and head out to Central Texas to a little hole in the road called Mountain Home. Just up the road from the cabins where we stayed was Ellebracht's Gas and Grocery, which was mostly gas, because the groceries were limited pretty much to Coca-Cola in one of those big old chest-type Coke machines, suspicious-looking canned goods, and boxes of slightly-out-of-date saltines. Mrs. Ellebracht, the kindly old woman who owned the place, would let me sit there for hours on end, reading the worn Richie Rich comic books, drinking Big Red soda, and chattering away to her. She was a good Christian woman, so she would also have me read the Bible to her, because she couldn't see well enough to read any longer. She had had cataract surgery, which in those days amounted to removing the clouded lens from the eye and substituting incredibly thick lenses in front of the eyes. Her glasses were as thick as the bottom of those Coke bottles she sold.

Mrs. Ellebracht owned a ranch just across the road. She would invite my family to cross the highway to go swim there in icy-cold, spring-fed pools surrounded by mint, and shaded by ancient live-oak trees. Her only instruction before we went was always the same: "Be sure to lock the gate after you, and if you see any of the laborers, just make like you don't see them." She would wink at my parents from behind those glasses, and as Texans, it was immediately understood that these were undocumented laborers. Not noticing them seemed a small enough price to pay for a refreshing swim.

Many years later I saw the name Ellebracht again, this time in news articles. It seems those laborers we were supposed to ignore weren't just workers, they were young men whom Mrs. Ellebracht's son Wesley, and grandson Walter, were picking up as hitchhikers on Interstate 10. They would bring them home to that ranch where they were kept as slaves, chained up at night, sexually abused, tortured with cattle prods, some of them to death, while Wesley and Walter made audio recordings of the torture. And kindly, saintly Mrs. Ellebracht, who loved to have me read her the Bible, was quoted in defense of her son and grandson, saying, "Every one of those men was fed every day. Every one of them was paid every day, and they all had a good, warm place to sleep there."

I was devastated when I read that because I realized: she saw them. But she didn't see them as human beings, equal in dignity to her. She saw them as commodities to make the ranch run. She saw them, and she walked to the other side of the road rather than deal with the reality of what was being done to them. She saw them, and had no pity. I cannot think of her any longer without thinking of those thick glasses, and of what she saw through them. And then I realized that we had seen them too...but we had seen them through our own lens, not for who they really were. And so we, too, walked past. The justice system there also looked the other way, giving Wesley only seven years of probation for these horrific acts. Justice is supposed to be blind, but not blind to the victims of crimes.

Today's gospel lesson is one that we've seen and heard so many times that I'm not sure we really see it anymore. "Good Samaritan" has become a cliché. We've pretty much reduced this story to a simple morality tale, and the moral is this: God wants us to be nice to people in need. Stop on that rainy night and help the person stranded by the side of the road. It's easy, just remember to do good deeds. But we know that already. So is Jesus just reminding us to be nice?

As I read the text this week, I was struck by the number of times that "seeing" shows up in the story. "The priest, when he saw the man, passed by on the other side." "The Levite, when he came to the place and saw the man, passed by on the other side." I wonder what it is that they see? They clearly don't see the man as their neighbor. He's nameless, faceless. We know nothing about him. Jesus refers to him with the Greek equivalent of "some guy," just to highlight this anonymity. Do the folks who pass by see him just as a bother, something that would slow them down in getting to the important places they needed to go? Or do they see him as someone who had brought a problem on himself, and judge

him? “The idiot, what was he doing to get himself in this kind of trouble?” Or do they see him as a symbol of a “social ill”? “When I get home, I’ll have to write a letter to the editor about how something needs to be done about these gangs of bandits!” Or, stripped of clothing that would identify his social standing or ethnicity or religious affiliation, do they not know how to classify him, and so they don’t know *how* they are supposed to respond? They see him, but they do not see *him*, they do not see a neighbor. They see, they avert their eyes, and they walk on past. Like old Mrs. Ellebracht, they see this guy through a distorted lens, and their hearts are unmoved. And these are the pious, religious folks!

How often do we do that? We see someone in need, but we move to the other side of the road to avoid seeing, to avoid getting involved. Or we see, but we turn that person into an abstraction, a “one of those people,” and we filter them out through our clouded vision, or through the lenses we’ve put in front of our spiritual eyes, so that we don’t have to deal with the person as an individual—as our neighbor, as someone we are called to serve not only as an abstraction, but in sacrificial, personal ways.

And then Jesus throws in a very unlikely character. A Samaritan. The foreigner. The one with the screwy religion. The Judeans would have seen the Samaritan as a threat and an offense—maybe sort of how we look at Muslims in our society today, or a young black man in a hoody in the dark. Now, if Jesus had just wanted this to be a simple moralistic tale about how we’re supposed to be nice to people, he could have had the hated Samaritan be the guy half-dead in the ditch, with a Jewish guy as the hero, who gets bonus points because he’s nice to somebody who is his enemy. But that’s not the direction Jesus takes it. There’s something more fundamental than just our doing good deeds at stake here.

So this Samaritan guy—insert here whatever kind of person makes *you* uncomfortable—walks up on the half-dead man. And Jesus says that he *sees* him. But he sees him in a different way from the first two who move across the road and keep walking. He truly sees him and is moved to deep compassion...the same kind of emotion Jesus himself experienced when he encountered the widow of Nain who had lost her only son...Luke says in that story that Jesus *saw* her, and was moved to gut-wrenching concern for her. It’s the same down-in-the-gut feeling that the loving father has when he looks across the field and *sees* his prodigal son returning across the fields. It is all in the seeing. Instead of walking to the other side of the road, the Samaritan stops what he’s doing, comes over and looks even more closely at this man, stops and focuses his gaze, and he is moved to deep, deep concern...and it is then that he takes concrete, costly, time-consuming, getting-his-hands-bloody steps to meet the man’s physical needs, commits to this stranger—and all because he has *seen* him, and has allowed himself to be moved to action.

What we hear from Jesus in this story is not that we need to do good deeds. We already know that. We know the commandments. But like the lawyer in the story, we want to limit who we do good to. We want a narrower field of vision. We want Jesus to tell us precisely who deserves our good deeds, what our obligation is. Let’s face it, we already think we have the list of who does and doesn’t deserve our help, we just want Jesus to confirm it. And that’s when Jesus tells us that it is not about our lists, our rules, it’s about having new eyes, eyes that aren’t clouded by the cataracts of prejudice, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class...all those things that keep us from seeing *everyone* as our neighbor. We need new eyes that can see both Trayvon Martin *and* George Zimmerman as the neighbor. We don’t need moral instructions, sisters and brothers...we need cataract surgery. That’s what we need to pray for...spiritual cataract surgery. We need to pray for eyes that see through Christ’s own eyes, and hearts that can be moved. Because when we stop and see others in the crystal-clear light of Christ, we will be moved down to our guts to do the good for them that we know we are called to do, not because we have to, but because we want to. It all starts with the seeing. Stop and look around you this week. And may Christ give you new eyes to see both friend and stranger so that your heart can be transformed to move you to action. AMEN